

**ITForum Paper #4**

# **Constructing Cultures in Distance Education**

**L. Adrienne Bonham  
Lauren Cifuentes  
Karen L. Murphy**

**Texas A&M University**

**Note:** There are four question interspersed throughout this 6 page paper. The questions are numbered, bolded, and italicized so you can spot them. We have set up a discussion board in Lesson 7 to address each of the questions. Pick one or two questions and respond to them in our discussion board this week. We have discussed the concepts of "Transactional Distance." This paper address many of those concerns. Be sure to find the work of Rick Shearer from Penn State University on this topic as well. It is of great concern in the field of distance learning today and you should be acutely aware of it implications in interaction strategies. Also, be sure to go to the last page and check out the information about the Instructional Technology Forum....George

[We will present a slightly longer form of this paper at the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education 6th International Conference (SITE 95) in San Antonio in March. Your dialogue with us now will add depth to our presentation. Besides inviting whatever comment you care to make, specific questions in brackets within the paper. Thanks.]

When we were young, we learned to walk on the left side of the road, facing the traffic, and to ride bicycles on the right side. Our mothers taught us, "Speak respectfully to your elders," and "When you introduce people, introduce the man or boy to the woman or girl."

There were, however, no computers in the childhood environments of most of us, and certainly no computer conferencing etiquette in our mothers' stores of knowledge. Neither did we know about listservs, or two-way interactive video conferencing classes, or computer conferences. There was no way for us to grow up with a common set of expectations about the social encounters we face in distance education experiences. No broad-based culture exists yet for distance education. Thus, we must be deliberate in engaging with students in order to create cultures that include formalized conventions for interaction.

This paper first focuses on a philosophical and theoretical base for developing social systems within various mediated-learning contexts. We then describe some misunderstandings that arise from the newness of the developing cultures. Finally we describe some of the social environments for constructing cultures in distance education.

## **Constructivism as a Useful Worldview**

Constructivism is a worldview or paradigm that defines learning as the process of constructing meaning about, or making sense of, our experiences. A number of learning theories are related to this worldview, including the idea of the sociohistorical nature of learning introduced by Russian researcher and theorist, Lev Vygotsky. (Wertsch substitutes the term sociocultural.) Vygotsky acknowledged that individual experience is part of what shapes a person's understanding of any situation; but he emphasized that it is only one influence. Our interpretation of the world is derived largely from the social environment in which we experience the world.

Language is one key social creation within which we live. We learn our first language from the people around us. Throughout life, we expend large amounts of time and energy negotiating the meaning of words and of language structures--in other words, participating in the social construction of meaning as it is expressed in oral and written language.

We actually learn many ways of speaking. Vygotsky referred to speech genres as oral or written language patterns existing within the same language but being used only in specific contexts. The genres don't so much differ in word meanings as in specific utterances and specific patterns of speech. Conventions can be thought of as individual rules within the genre.

Our patterns of greeting one another represent a whole set of genres: one set of phrases, sentences, and discussion topics for new business acquaintances; another for long-time business acquaintances we see every day; yet another for long-time business acquaintances we see only at occasional meetings. If we can extend the idea of genres beyond words to actions, we may be said to have one set of conventions of greetings for business (handshakes, for instance), another for social occasions (hugs or backslaps), a third for family (embraces or kisses). The convention that we choose for greeting an individual tells how close we perceive the relationship to be.

Perhaps we could phrase the current problem as one of underdeveloped genres for the various technologies of distance education and perhaps for different groups of individuals using the same technology. Older technologies--correspondence courses, video tape or audio tape distribution, radio, and television--have two advantages: They have had more time for cultures to develop; at the same time, these technologies are less interactive and thus require fewer conventions about how interaction will be accomplished. The newer, more interactive technologies include audio conferencing, both one-way and two-way video conferencing, and various forms of computer-mediated communication (e.g., e-mail, computer conferencing, and bulletin board systems).

**1. *Constructivism is widely used as a philosophy/theory base within instructional technology. What is your response to this application of the idea?***

**Example of Cultural Problems in Distance Education**

An example shows how the lack of common culture can create problems in the more interactive forms of distance education. Anyone who has participated in a two-way video conference utilizing video compression has experienced the awkwardness created by the delay of video transmission. At each end, we find ourselves simultaneously pausing politely to let the other person speak and then simultaneously speaking in response to each other's pause. Groups who frequently meet via two-way video conference may establish signals to identify the current speaker or to determine who should speak next. These signals have not been established as conventions for this format. However, if we as teacher educators report to a wide audience both successful and unsuccessful video conferencing conventions, we will contribute significantly to the construction of a shared social environment.

**2. *[Can you think of other examples, from your own experience?***

**Environmental Influences on the Creation of Distance Education Cultures**

Ultimately, cultures are created by the people who participate in them. However, many factors outside of the group influence the culture being formed by the group. In terms of distance education cultures, influences on development may come from publications, groups, individuals, and computer-mediated communication.

**Publications**

Publications offer varied perspectives on distance education, which in turn influence, to a certain degree, the development of distance education cultures. Several academic journals focus exclusively on distance education (e.g., *The American Journal of Distance Education*, *Journal of Distance Education*, *Distance Education*, *Open Learning*, *Open Praxis*). While such journals can provide more timely discussion of issues than books, the matter of developing distance education cultures is rarely addressed explicitly.

Literally scores of books have been published on distance education in general, while other books focus on specific applications such as various forms of teleconferencing, computer conferencing, audio conferencing, and video conferencing.

*Linking for Learning* was the first broad-based publication addressing distance education in K-12 settings. The K-12 literature includes journals of two types: one type focuses exclusively on a particular facet of distance education (such as *Telecommunications in Education News*), while the other type mentions distance education as part of a more general education focus (e.g., *Technology and Teacher*

*Education, The Computing Teacher, Journal of Teacher Education, Teaching and Teacher Education*).

Technical literature abounds with information about telecommunications, the Internet, and video conferencing in such publications as *Wired, On-Line Access, Connect, PC Computing*, and *TeleConference*. Even popular literature (e.g., *Business Week, Time, Fortune*, and *Scientific American*) include articles about distance education.

## **Groups**

Another major influence on the development of distance education cultures comes from interactions within distance education associations, organizations, and conferences and other professional meetings. On an international scale, the International Council for Distance Education, for example, holds a conference every two years in different parts of the world. Annual distance education conferences in the US are sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Oregon State University, the University of Maine-Augusta, and more recently Texas A&M University. The Pennsylvania State University sponsored the first International Distance Education Conference in June 1994. The International Society for Technology in Education sponsors conferences (in addition to providing special interest groups, services, and materials), the Canadian Association of Distance Education holds annual conferences, and the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia sponsors conferences, workshops, and seminars.

## **Individuals**

Cultures of all kinds are created and communicated with and by colleagues, peers, friends, and relatives. Some examples help to show how peer pressure is already at work in distance education cultures.

On a Bulletin Board System (BBS), for instance, it is generally considered to be good manners to sign messages that you post. Also, there are proper ways of extracting messages when one wants to comment or reply. Peers penalize each other on-line when conventions are not observed. For instance, participants in on-line discussions who simply rehash the issues or offer a "Me too," may receive countless messages indicating that they are idiots; or they may receive mail bombs (enough junk mail to keep them busy for days cleaning out their on-line mail boxes).

Status in a BBS can be gained by establishing oneself as an expert able to answer questions posted on-line and to answer them concisely. Long diatribes or emotional outbursts are considered inappropriate in this emerging culture. This culture, like most, grants higher status to members who spend the necessary time interacting with others in the culture and thus learning its mores.

## Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

CMC, a relatively new genre, serves as both a delivery system of instruction and a forum for discussing distance education. With the proliferation of listservs, electronic journals, and news groups--and with increased access to the Internet worldwide--information and ideas are exchanged electronically within seconds. As evidence of this proliferation, Ellsworth maintains an on-line directory of over 100 listservs and on-line journals about distance education and/or adult education alone. For those more interested in K-12 distance education, the on-line offerings from a variety of resources on the Internet are increasing at a mind-boggling pace.

Two examples of what is being circulated on-line about developing cultures in distance education include a listserv message requesting information about the do's and don'ts of video conferencing in higher education and an on-line journal article entitled "Teaching via Compressed Video: Promising Practices and Potential Pitfalls." As these examples illustrate, educators use on-line resources to pose their questions and describe their experiences, both of which evoke replies and lead to shared cultures of distance education.

People who want to learn the conventions of a particular listserv or BBS often do so by "lurking," or observing the style of on-line interactions, before posting their own messages. Many CMC conventions are also available by File Transfer Protocol (ftp) in such guides to the Internet as *Zen and the Art of the Internet* and *An Incomplete Guide to the Internet*. "Netiquette," or network etiquette, generally includes specific guidelines such as length of messages, use of the subject line, replying to messages, using upper and lower case type, signing messages, and quoting passages. Two other conventions that are becoming more familiar are acronyms and "emoticons" (icons representing emotions) in text-based environments. Examples of acronyms are BTW [by the way] and IMHO [in my humble opinion] and of emoticons are :- ) [a smile] and :-( [a frown].

In summary, the four sources of influence described above have not addressed the construction of cultures in distance education. While random descriptions of developing cultures of distance education exist within the literature, in groups, and between individuals, the most consistent source of culture-building seems to be CMC itself. This paper, written originally as both a paper and a conference presentation--and now offered for discussion by this listserv--is an attempt to make explicit the discussion of constructing cultures in distance education to an organized group.

***3. [Do you think of other sources of cultural development, outside of the group which actually creates the culture? What examples can you offer about how culture is being created?]***

## Conclusions

The ideas presented in this paper lead to several conclusions. While culture is usually thought to develop over time without much conscious attention, the rapid growth in use of distance education technologies means that a more rapid and deliberate development of cultures is needed. Because there are multiple cultures in distance education, the strengths and weaknesses of different technologies and the differing purposes of interactions make it impossible for one set of mores to fit all situations.

As teachers of teachers and of future teachers, we have the opportunity to help create useful cultures by using distance technologies in the classes we teach. By modeling appropriate conventions and making explicit what those conventions are, we are preparing teachers to create useful cultures with their own students.

A teacher who wishes to have a useful, comfortable climate for interaction and learning will do well to remember that all culture is created by group negotiation and not by authority's fiat. Such a teacher will devote learning time to group interaction around issues of culture building, knowing the issues that are at stake but giving participants room to negotiate the conventions that will best accomplish the purposes for which the group is formed.

### ***4. What are you doing within your own field of practice to facilitate the forming of cultures within various modes of distance learning?***

The original authors of this paper are listed below...

**Adrianne Bonham**  
 615 Harrington Tower  
 Texas A&M University  
 College Station, TX 77843-3256  
 Phone: 409 845-5497  
 E-mail: [bonham@acs.tamu.edu](mailto:bonham@acs.tamu.edu)

**Karen Murphy**  
 E-mail: [kmurphy@acsl.tamu.edu](mailto:kmurphy@acsl.tamu.edu)

This paper can be found at: <http://it.coe.uga.edu/itforum/paper4/paper4.html>

**This paper is part of the Instructional Technology Forum at the University of Georgia. If you are interested being a member of this listserve, the information below can get you started....George**

## INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY FORUM

ITFORUM is an electronic listserv where people from around the world discuss theories, research, new paradigms, and practices in the field of Instructional Technology. ITFORUM was founded in 1994 and has been sponsored since its inception by the [Department of Instructional Technology at The University of Georgia](#). The list is open to anyone interested in instructional technology (a special invitation is extended to graduate students in IT programs)

ITFORUM is a little different from most listservs in that specific discussions are conducted throughout the year. From time to time, leaders in the field are invited to write a short paper or essay that is posted on the website prior to discussion. This guest discussant remains available electronically on the list for a period of one week to discuss, debate, or answer questions from subscribers.

The Moderator for the list, [Kathy Ingram](#) of the University of South Alabama, coordinates and facilitates discussions and handles the day-to-day management of the list. [Lloyd Rieber](#) of The University of Georgia, who started ITFORUM in 1994 and served as Moderator until 1998 now acts as "Moderator Emeritus" and provides advice, expertise, and assistance with list management. [Dan Surry](#) of the University of South Alabama, who served as Moderator from 1998 until 2003 also continues to help with the list.

It's useful to compare discussions on ITFORUM with those of a hallway chat between colleagues after hearing a really good presentation at a conference. Our hope is that ITFORUM will be a place where people feel free to make more casual comments about issues confronting the field rather than the usual hardcore, often stuffy, academic rhetoric. One important distinction between ITFORUM and these hallway chats is that everyone has the chance to discuss the talk with the speaker/s and with colleagues from around the world (especially those without Ph.D.s - in fact, rank has little meaning on ITFORUM). You should not feel you have to labor days on a comment or question before you post it. We also feel that "lurking" is a perfectly acceptable form of participation. We like to think of ourselves as a friendly bunch who are willing to share our ideas and knowledge of instructional technology with one another.

Dr. Gene Wilkeson of The University of Georgia developed the original ITFORUM website. His time and efforts on behalf of ITFORUM are greatly appreciated.

